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[10.1080/14780038.2019.1640022](https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2019.1640022)

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Citation for published version (APA):

Harris, A. (2019). A Magna Carta for Marriage: Love, Catholic Masculinities and the *Humanae Vitae* Contraception Crisis in 1968 Britain. *Cultural and Social History*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2019.1640022>

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A Magna Carta for Marriage: Love, Catholic Masculinities and the *Humanae Vitae* Contraception Crisis in 1968 Britain

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Abstract

When *Humanae Vitae* (the highly-controversial encyclical which banned the contraceptive pill for Catholics) was finally promulgated in the summer of 1968, it was the culmination of more than five years of intense speculation and well-founded anticipation of a change in Vatican teaching on birth control. This article explores the gendered ambiguities embedded within this watershed document, its role as a touchstone for, paradoxically, both progressive and conservative understandings of Catholic masculinity, and the ways in which the encyclical was a catalyst for refashioned understandings of married love and sexual intimacy in sixties Britain.

Using the outpouring of newspaper correspondence it generated to chart a changing moral landscape and sexual politics beyond a mythologized 'swinging' London, it argues that the unexamined sentiments of these mostly conventional and thoroughly respectable letter writers of 'middle England' offer new avenues for interrogating old questions about secularization and permissiveness. In seeking to reappraise male contraceptive responsibilities after the pill and to redraw marital love in ways that encompassed the romantic, the companionate, the passionate and the prosaic, *Humanae Vitae* facilitated the development of a lay theology of marriage. These creative redefinitions of marriage as a sacramental and sociological reality continued to valorize reproductive sex as central to the institution, but also included an increased acknowledgement of the role of desire and pleasure within heterosexual marital sex for men and, tentatively, women too.

Keywords

contraception – masculinity – marriage – sexuality – sixties

A Magna Carta for Marriage: Love, Catholic Masculinities and the *Humanae Vitae* Contraception Crisis in 1968 Britain¹

On 29 July 1968, Pope Paul VI published his infamous encyclical letter, *Humanae Vitae*, which sparked furious dissension across the Catholic world in its condemnation of ‘artificial contraception’ and adjudication that the use of birth control ‘could open the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards.’² In Britain over the weeks following, the pages of the national and religious press were dominated by comment and critique of the encyclical, leading the *Catholic Herald* to conclude pithily: ‘U.K. reaction Most Intense’.³ Alongside media coverage of the petitions and closely argued commentary, some English Catholics took to the streets. Their tactics echoed those of the 1960s counter-culture through marches and Cathedral ‘sit-ins’, contentious large-scale public meetings, and spontaneously formed collectives mobilized to support dissident priests and disaffected laity.⁴ The response was so ferocious that, in late September, the Bishops of England and Wales felt compelled to offer collective a pastoral letter as a (marginally effective) exercise in damage control, suggesting that dissent from the papal position was so widespread as to warrant coordinated action.⁵ However individual Bishops’ rejoinders were not always so diplomatically couched. Hardline traditionalists like Archbishop Cyril Cowderoy of Southwark were, perhaps perversely, more honest in their assessment of

¹ For invaluable feedback and helpful commentary on this paper, the author gratefully thanks Katie Barclay, Lucy Delap, Daniel Grey, Mary Heimann, Sally Holloway, Sue Morgan and Timothy Folkard, as well as audiences in the Life-Cycles Seminar (IHR) and the School of History, Archeology and Religion at the University of Cardiff.

² Encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (‘Of Human Life’), §17 – dated 25 July 1968, but promulgated four days later, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html (accessed 15 September 2018).

³ ‘U. K. Reaction Most Intense’, *Catholic Herald*, 23 August 1968, 2.

⁴ For comparison with the European response, see Alana Harris, ‘The Catholic ’68: Love and Protest’, *History Workshop Online*, 25 July 2018, <http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-catholic-68-love-and-protest/> (accessed 6 August 2018).

⁵ ‘The episcopal statement not made in panic’, *Catholic Herald*, 27 September 1968, 1 and 4 (full text).

the conventional gendered ideals and unchanging reproductive responsibilities embedded within the papal imprimatur, in its claim to be the definitive Catholic statement on modern married love and Catholic 'conjugal life'.⁶

Representative of those welcoming a conclusive (negative) statement on 'the pill', after years of speculation about its status as a permitted form of birth control which could be compatible with the 'natural law' and comparable to the long recognized 'rhythm method',⁷ was Archbishop John Murphy of Cardiff. In a pastoral letter that was widely reported and drew irate criticism from Catholic progressives,⁸ Archbishop Murphy proclaimed:

Make no mistake about this encyclical. There may be a contemporary clamour, drowning the quiet relief of many and the heroic acceptance of the disappointed, but when the history of these days comes to be written, this encyclical will be hailed as the Magna Carta, not merely of all women but of all men and all children. ...

The Pope has refused to bow to the compassionate plea of those who in a sincere desire to strip women of her anxieties would strip her of all dignity and status and reduce her to a mere chattel of her lord. He has refused to offer contraceptives to man as a cheap way of controlling his instincts and avoiding his responsibilities. Let the husband himself be responsible to his wife and by reasonable self control remove her anxieties.⁹

In this curious conflation of Runnymede and Rome, likening the encyclical to the 'Great Charter' in its iconic statement of feudal rights and seigniorial responsibilities, the polarizing appeals to law and liberty by advocates and critics alike were equated.

The papal statement's foregrounding of the need for a reconfigured understanding of

⁶ Kevin Mayhew, 'Shaping the pill policy', *Catholic Herald*, 13 September 1968, 3.

⁷ For a summary of such arguments, see Leo Pyle, *The Pill and Birth Regulation* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964) and Thomas D. Roberts, *Contraception and Holiness: The Catholic Predicament* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964).

⁸ Desmond Albrow (Editorial), 'Not the Last Word', *Catholic Herald*, 2 August 1968, 4.

⁹ 'The Encyclical – A Magna Carta for Mankind', *Catholic Herald*, 2 August 1968, 4; *The Universe*, 2 August 1968, 6.

male sexuality and a conservative form of spousal equality were also elaborated upon, and extended, through Archbishop Murphy's pastoral advice to his bewildered flock. It is the gendered ambiguities embedded within the encyclical, its appeals to, paradoxically, both progressive and conservative masculinities, and its attempts to refashion marital love – by countering the objections of the laity in the context of a rapidly changing sexual culture – which form the subject of this article. What did this 'charter' on married (perhaps even 'romanticised') love and contraceptive responsibilities for sixties Catholics prohibit and prescribe?

Despite its iconic status as a watershed document, and the highly sensational and vitriolic ferment that it generated, historians of post-war sexuality and the sixties have mostly refrained from a fulsome exploration of *Humanae Vitae*.¹⁰ This lacuna also characterizes much of the historiography of post-war religion which, until recently, has been mired in debates about sex, religious decline and secularization.¹¹ Callum Brown's highly influential *The Death of Christian Britain*,¹² and his follow-up volume *Religion and the Demographic Revolution* set the terms of these coterminous

¹⁰ For a limited discussion see: Mark Donnelly, *Sixties Britain: Culture, Society and Politics* (London: Pearson, 2005), 53-4 and Gerard De Groot, *The Sixties Unplugged: a Kaleidoscopic History of a Disorderly Decade* (London: Macmillan, 2008), 364-9. There is a marked silence in the 1968 historiography, e.g. Vladamir Tismaneanu, *Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion, and Utopia* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011) and Lessie Jo Frazier and Deborah Cohen (eds), *Gender and Sexuality in 1968: Transformative Politics in the Cultural Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). A notable exception is the chapter on 'faith' in Robert Gildea, James Mark and Anette Waring (eds), *Europe's 1968: Voices of Revolt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 211-238. For a generalized explanation of the reasons for this oversight, see Gerd Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II: Western European Progressive Catholicism in the Long Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

¹¹ For excellent overview volumes, albeit without direct discussion of *Humanae Vitae*, see Leo Kenis, Jaak Billiet and Patrick Pasture (eds), *The Transformation of the Christian Churches in Western Europe, 1945-2000* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010) and Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau (eds), *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianization in North America and Western Europe, 1945-2000* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). For a concentrated discussion of the encyclical, see Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 93-100, 182-7.

¹² Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001), 220-8.

debates about ‘religious change and gender power’,¹³ foregrounding the role of increasingly financially and sexually independent women in refashioning gender relationships, asserting their own contraceptive choices, and thereby (necessarily) disaffiliating from Christian mores.¹⁴ Influenced by a recent reappraisal of religion as an ideological resource in the formulation of sexual rhetorics and gendered regimes,¹⁵ a new strand of the historiography of British Catholicism has sought to break this analytical impasse and reappraise what might be understood as the evolution of a distinctive ‘Catholic sexology’ in the interwar and post-war period.¹⁶ Yet women have remained the focus of these interrogations of religious change, despite Lucy Delap’s¹⁷ and Sue Morgan’s clarion calls for greater attention to ‘the influence of religion on the formation of men as gendered and sexual beings’ so as to make ‘male piety visible’ and in doing so challenge ‘any single hegemonic religious ideal of masculinity’.¹⁸

¹³ Callum G. Brown, ‘Secularisation, the Growth and Militancy of the Spiritual Revolution: Religious Change and Gender Power in Britain 1901-2001’, *Historical Research* 80 (2007): 393-418.

¹⁴ Callum G. Brown, ‘Sex, Religion and the Single Woman c1950-75’, *Twentieth Century British History* 22(2) (2011): 189-215.

¹⁵ Harry G. Cocks, ‘Religion and Spirituality’ in *The Modern History of Sexuality*, eds. Harry G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 157-79; Sue Morgan, ‘“Wild Oats or Acorns?” Social Purity, Sexual Politics and the Response of the late-Victorian Church’, *Journal of Religious History* 31(1)(2007): 151-68; Sue Morgan and Joanna de Groot (eds), *Sex, Gender and the Sacred: Reconfiguring Religion in Gender History* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014); Timothy Willem Jones, ‘Postsecular Sex? Secularisation and Religious Change in the History of Sexuality in Britain’, *History Compass* 11(11)(2013): 918-30 and Sam Brewitt-Taylor, ‘Christianity and the Invention of the Sexual Revolution in Britain, 1963-1967’, *Historical Journal* 60(2)(2017): 519-46. For a recent summary of this shifting historiographical terrain, see Callum G. Brown, *The Battle for Christian Britain: Sex, Humanists and Secularisation 1945-1980* (Cambridge: CUP, 2019), chapter one.

¹⁶ Alana Harris ‘“The Writings of Querulous Women”: Contraception, Conscience and Clerical Authority in 1960s Britain’, *British Catholic History* 34(2)(2015): 557-585 and David Geiringer, ‘Catholic Understandings of Female Sexuality in 1960s Britain’, *Twentieth Century British History* 28(1)(2017): 209-38. In the North American context, see Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004) and Leslie Woodcock Tentler (ed.), *The Church Confronts Modernity: Catholicism Since 1960 in the United States, the Republic of Ireland, and Quebec* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Lucy Delap, ‘Conservative Values, Anglicans, and the Gender Order in Interwar Britain’, in *Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation Building in Britain Between the Wars*, eds. Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas (London: IHR Publications, 2012), 149-168.

¹⁸ Lucy Delap and Sue Morgan (eds), *Men, Masculinity and Religious Change in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1-2.

This article offers a compelling intervention into this growing historiography around post-World War II masculinities¹⁹ through its detailed exploration of the contentious debates in the wake of the encyclical about faithful Catholic masculinity, male sexuality, the nexus between passion and marital love, and the nature of marriage as a sacrament in sixties Britain. In its use of first person testimonies (chiefly letters to the editor and extended opinion pieces) from a number of mainstream and religious newspapers, it seeks to chart transformations in the everyday marital lives and affective relationships of ‘ordinary’ Catholic men and women, using *Humanae Vitae* as a lightning rod for interrogating differing religious renderings of the relationship between love (romantic and companionate) and marital sex. In analyzing a constituency far broader than the youthful libertines of swinging Soho,²⁰ or the commentaries of well-known sex ‘experts’,²¹ the flood of correspondence that dominated opinion pages between August and December 1968 offers a depth-sounding of the spectrum of debate around moral change, personal liberty, sexual intimacy and religious authority within a constituency that might be called ‘middle England’. The ‘Magna Carta’ moment surrounding the publication of *Humanae Vitae* illuminated, in startlingly frank terms given a not-long-discarded reticence to discuss sex in public,²² the widespread instability and remarkable malleability of gendered understandings of romance, as well as desire and passion, as enduring elements of

¹⁹ Beginning with Lesley Hall’s path-breaking *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality 1900-1950* (London: Wiley, 1991) and most recently Laura King, *Family Men: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), Ben Griffins, ‘Hegemonic Masculinity as a Historical Problem’, *Gender and History* 30(2)(2018): 377-400 and Katherine Jones, “‘Men Too’: Masculinities and Contraceptive Politics in Late Twentieth Century Britain”, *Contemporary British History* (forthcoming 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2019.1621170>).

²⁰ Jonathan Green, *All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counterculture* (London: Pimlico, 1998) and Arthur Marwick, ‘The Cultural Revolution of the Long Sixties: Voices of Reaction, Protest, and Permeation’, 27(4) *International History Review* 27(4)(2005): 780-806.

²¹ Ben Mechen, “‘Closer Together’: Durex Condoms and Contraceptive Consumerism in 1970s Britain’ in *Perceptions of pregnancy from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century*, eds. Jennifer Evans and Ciara Meehan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 213-36.

²² Adrian Bingham, ‘The “K-bomb”: Social Surveys, the Popular Press and British Sexual Culture in the 1940s and 1950s’, *Journal of British Studies* 50(1)(2011): 156-79.

marital affection and sexual intimacy. Progressive and conservative masculinities both appealed to an ideal and the actuality of married love and thereby formulated alternative lay theologies of marriage, within and sometimes far beyond the parameters set out by the papal encyclical.

‘On the Regulation of Birth’: The Encyclical and its Prescriptions

When *Humanae Vitae* was finally promulgated in the summer of 1968, it was the culmination of more than five years of intense speculation and well-founded anticipation of a change of papal teaching about contraception. Brought into focus with increasing urgency through the reiterated (if guarded) sanction of family planning at the Church of England’s Lambeth Conference in 1958,²³ the introduction of Searle’s anovulant pill *Conovid* to the British market in 1961,²⁴ and growing concerns about overpopulation, questions about the Catholic position on these pressing moral issues were raised at the Second Session of the Second Vatican Council in 1963. While there was some limited discussion of ‘responsible parenthood’ in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, (*Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965, §47-52),²⁵ its guidance on birth control was concise, circumspect, and even cryptic in its exhortation: ‘sons of the Church may not undertake methods of birth control which are found blameworthy by the teaching authority of the Church in its unfolding of the divine law’.²⁶ Discussion of this topic was therefore removed from the consideration of the world’s 2000-plus Bishops

²³ Timothy Willem Jones, *Sexual Politics in the Church of England, 1857-1957* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 131-61.

²⁴ Lara Marks, *Sexual Chemistry: A History of the Contraceptive Pill* (Yale: YUP, 2001), 77 and 215-36 and Bernard Asbell, *The Pill: A Biography of a Drug that Changed the World* (London: Random House, 1995).

²⁵ http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, Chapter I (accessed 7 August 2018).

²⁶ *Ibid*, §51.

meeting in Rome and conferred upon an initially secret gathering of six European laymen meeting at the University of Louvain in October 1963.²⁷ This body would be formalized and expanded to become the ‘Pontifical Commission on Population, Family and Birth’ to include 72 members from five continents – encompassing theologians, physicians and psychologists, demographers, economists and sociologists, as well as married couples and an executive committee of 16 Bishops.²⁸

The intricacies of the Pontifical Commission’s deliberations between 1964-66 have been authoritatively reconstructed by *Time* magazine correspondent Robert Blair Kaiser, who contemporaneously covered the happenings in Rome,²⁹ and later penned *The Encyclical that Never Was* (1985).³⁰ This eminently readable history, drawing upon participant interviews as well as archival sources, explained the process behind the formation of the Pontifical Commission’s final report – never officially published, but leaked to the media in the Spring of 1967³¹ – which recommended that ‘the regulation of contraception appears necessary for many couples who wish to achieve a responsible, open and reasonable parenthood’ and that the use of contraceptives or ‘artificial intervention’ (adjudged against the criteria of ‘generous’ and ‘responsible fruitfulness’) is a natural extension of the calculated sterile periods sanctioned by Pope Pius XII. As 64 of the 69 voting members of the Pontifical Commission approved of this document, it became known as the ‘Majority Report’ and its

²⁷ Wannes Dupont, ‘Of Human Love: Catholics Campaigning for Sexual Aggiornamento in Postwar Belgium’ in *The Schism of ‘68: Catholics, Contraception and Humanae Vitae in Europe, 1945-65*, ed. Alana Harris (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 56.

²⁸ Robert McClory, *Turning Point: the Inside Story of the Papal Birth Control Commission, and how Humanae Vitae Changed the Life of Patty Crowley and the Future of the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

²⁹ Robert Kaiser, *Inside the Council: The Story of Vatican II* (London: Burns and Oates, 1963) and *Clerical Error: a True Story* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

³⁰ Robert Kaiser, *The Encyclical that Never Was* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1985).

³¹ ‘Final Report of the Pontifical Commission on Population, Family and Birth’, *The Tablet*, 22 April 1967 – reprinted in Kaiser, *Encyclical*, 3-18.

sensationalized, global circulation in April 1967 raised expectations of the liberalization of church's teaching. This was despite the demurrer of the Commission member John Ford SJ who, with the assistance of Thomistic philosopher Germain Grisez, drafted a dissenting working paper signed by three other theologian priests (including its President and head of the Curia, Cardinal Ottaviani, and the papal theologian Bishop Colombo).³² This document became known as the 'Minority Report' and formed the basis of 'Magisterium's reply' in the shape of *Humanae Vitae* issued a year later³³ – disregarding the informed deliberations and express recommendations of the experts within the Pontifical Commission. *Humanae Vitae* was therefore formulated in flagrant contradiction to these previous consultative processes, and prioritized theological reasoning in overturning an interdisciplinary, democratic consensus.

In its most strident terms, and with considerable question marks surrounding its status as an infallible teaching, the encyclical held that in accordance with natural law 'each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life' (§11)³⁴ and that use of any form of birth control other than the 'infertile period' (§16) was 'intrinsically wrong' (§14). As such, it concluded that the consequences of artificial birth control are 'marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards' (§17). All of these pronouncements were parsed in considerable detail in the months that followed – *The Times* alone received over 1000

³² See Kaiser, *Encyclical*, 209-39 and Leo Pyle, *Pope and Pill: More Documentation on the Birth Regulation Debate* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1968), 272-306.

³³ For the most recent account of the drafting process surrounding *Humanae Vitae*, based on the Vatican archive which is currently closed to researchers, see Gilfredo Marengo, *La nascita di un' enciclica. Humanae Vitae alla luce degli Archivi Vaticani* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018).

³⁴ http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html (accessed 7 August 2018) and *The Regulation of Human Life: Encyclical Letter of Pope Paul VI 'Humanae Vitae' 1968* (translated by Alan C. Clark and Geoffrey Crawford) (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1968). This first English translation was a best seller, with 43,000 copies immediately sold in Britain and 30,000 in France – *The Universe*, 16 August 1968, 12.

letters on the issue in the first week of August, with the Catholic editor of *The Times*, William Rees-Moggs, confiding to Cardinal Heenan that ‘never in the whole history of *The Times* had there been such a weight of correspondence’.³⁵ Alongside the lamentations of the laity, members of the Pontifical Commission also critiqued these judgments in the press – Dr André Hellegers (a French medical practitioner), reflected on the distinction drawn between the Rhythm Method and other ‘artificial’ means: ‘I cannot believe that salvation is based on the thermometer, or that damnation is based on rubber’.³⁶ Writing in *The Times*, Dr John Marshall (a British member of the Pontifical Commission and previously a cautious medical advisor to the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council) also broke ranks.³⁷ Dr Marshall categorically rejected the assertion that ‘artificial birth control opens a wide and easy road to conjugal infidelity’ as a ‘gratuitous slur on the countless responsible married people who practise contraception and whose married life is an example to all.’³⁸ He was not alone in noting the ‘spurious sociology’ surrounding the ‘cause and effect relationship drawn between birth control responsibly practiced and the evils enumerated’, which could be countered by the countless examples of couples presenting ‘an edifying picture of admirable family life’.³⁹ Within the Pontifical Commission itself, and in the fall-out from *Humanae Vitae*, sociological assessments were highly prioritized and

³⁵ Reported in a letter from Cardinal Heenan to Archbishop Thomas Roberts, 11 October 1968, Archives of the Archdiocese of Westminster (hereafter AAW) HE1/C20(G). As a comparison, a Catholic weekly reported over 500 named letters ‘not just from “intellectuals” but every strata of society’ – *Catholic Herald*, 16 August 1968, 9.

³⁶ Xavier Rynne, ‘Letter from Vatican City’, 2 November 1968, *The New Yorker* (available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1968/11/02/letter-from-vatican-city-13> (accessed 7 August 2018)).

³⁷ Alana Harris, ‘Love Divine and Love Sublime: The Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, the Marriage Guidance Movement and the State’ in *Love and Romance in Britain, 1918–1970*, eds. Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 188–224.

³⁸ Dr John Marshall, ‘Putting the Clocks Back’, *The Times*, 31 July 1968, 9 and ‘Birth Control Debate Grows’, *Catholic Herald*, 2 August 1968, 1.

³⁹ (Dr) A. Coady, ‘Into a Vicious circle’, *Catholic Herald*, 16 August 1968, 5.

alternative forms of authority and expertise clearly moved beyond a narrowly clerical preserve.⁴⁰

Less noted contemporaneously, but striking in its positive endorsement of broader social and cultural developments since the 1930s around the institution of marriage,⁴¹ was an effective adoption within the encyclical of the language of ‘companionate marriage’ and ‘mutuality’.⁴² The text was replete with references to married love as a mode ‘together [to] attain their human fulfillment’, and a ‘special form of personal friendship in which husband and wife generously share everything’ (§9). Responsible parenthood – terminology long synonymous with the family planning movement – was urged for socio-economic reasons and understood as entailing duties towards other families and human society, as well as to God and the couple themselves (§10). Endorsing the fundamental re-working of church teaching signaled by *Gaudium et Spes* §49 (§7), *Humanae Vitae* acknowledged that sexual activity is ‘noble and worthy’ and that the ‘unitive significance and the procreative significance ... are both inherent to the marriage act’ (§12). The contrast with former papal teaching, epitomized by Pope Pius XI’s 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii* which condemned birth control as ‘intrinsically evil’, could not be more pronounced.⁴³ Eschewing discussion

⁴⁰ See Jeremy Morris, ‘Enemy Within? The Appeal of the Discipline of Sociology to Religious Professionals in Post-War Britain’, *Journal of Religion in Europe* 9(2-3)(2016): 177-200 and more generally Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford: OUP, 2010).

⁴¹ See. B. B. Lindsey and W. Evans, *The Companionate Marriage* (London: Brentano’s, 1928) and Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield, ‘Social Reconstruction and the Emergence of Companionate Marriage, 1945-59’ in *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change*, ed. David Clark (London: Routledge, 1991), 7-32.

⁴² Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: Personal Relationships in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Newark: University of Delaware, 2005); Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford: OUP, 2013) and Teri Chettiar, ‘More than a Contract: The Emergence of a State-Supported Marriage Welfare Service and the Politics of Emotional Life in Post-1945 Britain’, *Journal of British Studies* 55(3)(2016): 566-91.

⁴³ Pius XI, encyclical *Casti Connubii* (1930), §54, https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii.html (accessed 7 August 2018). See Lucia Pozzi, ‘The Encyclical *Casti Connubii* (1930): The Origin of the Twentieth Century

of the ‘primary’ ends of marriage (i.e. procreation) and ‘secondary’ or subsidiary goods (‘mutual aid’, ‘mutual love’ and ‘the quieting of concupiscence’),⁴⁴ perhaps the most fundamental signal of a changed sacramental framing was the wholesale abandonment of the so-called Augustinian ‘order of love’ (with man superior to woman), reinforced by citation of the Pauline injunction to wives’ subservience.⁴⁵ In stark contrast, Paul VI opened his encyclical nearly forty years later on the cusp of the Women’s Liberation Movement, and with a tacit nod to the psychology of sexuality, to affirm:

noteworthy is a new understanding of the dignity of woman and her place in society, of the value of conjugal love in marriage and the relationship of conjugal acts to this love.⁴⁶

In this respect, there is much within the encyclical that could be hailed as inspirational, progressive, and an appropriate development of the Catholic theology of marriage in line with broader social scientific developments and ecumenical Christian teaching.⁴⁷

The encyclical acknowledged, however, that its subsequent conclusions about birth control would be a ‘sign of contradiction’ (§18), as they broke with countervailing tendencies in societies’ refashioning of romantic love, sexual passion and marriage. These counter-cultural injunctions to a highly idealized construction of marriage not only encompassed the condemnation of ‘artificial contraception’ (or ‘technical expedients’ in the language of the encyclical) compared to the ‘natural rhythms’

Discourse of the Catholic Church on Family and Sexuality’ in *La Sainte Famille. Sexualité, filiation et parentalité dans l’Eglise Catholique*, eds. Cécile Vanderpelen-Diagre, and Caroline Sägerser (Bruxelles: Les éditions de l’Université libre de Bruxelles, 2017), 41-54.

⁴⁴ *Casti Connubii* (1930), §59.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, §26.

⁴⁶ *Humanae Vitae* (1968), §2.

⁴⁷ For an overview, see Sue Morgan, “‘The Word made Flesh’: Women, Religion and Sexual Cultures’ in *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940*, eds. Sue Morgan and Jacqueline de Vries (London: Routledge, 2010), 159-87.

which Catholic couples and scientists were called upon to study and perfect (§24), but pivoted most especially on ways in which male spousal sexuality should be understood. While parts of the treatise acknowledged the inherent goodness and intrinsic nature of sex to Christian marriage, there were discordant accents that sounded profoundly differing assessments. Considerable emphasis throughout was given to ‘chaste limitation’ and the ‘promotion of chastity’ (§22). Self-discipline, self-denial and ‘control of natural drives’ remained cardinal virtues (§21). This conflict between an ascetic puritanism and an evolving theology of sexuality was nowhere better encapsulated than within the infamous principle on which the contraceptive prohibition was justified:

Responsible men can become more deeply convinced of the truth of the doctrine laid down by the Church on this issue if they reflect on the consequences of methods and plans for artificial birth control. Let them first consider how easily this course of action *could open wide the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards*. ... Another effect that gives cause for alarm is that a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods *may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires*, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection.⁴⁸ [my italics]

Masculinity and male sexual desire through this lens were viewed as lustful, insatiable and even bestial. The pill, through this optic, would infantilize Catholic husbands, blinding them to their paternal responsibilities and inhibiting moral growth and spiritual maturity. Readily ‘indulged’ without the natural inhibitor of fear of pregnancy and impending breadwinner responsibility, male sexuality had the potential to distort, to corrupt and even to kill love. Implicit within these telling phrases was the

⁴⁸ *Humanae Vitae*, §17. Note that in some initial translations of the Latin, ‘mere instrument’ was rendered as ‘chattel’.

persistence of the sexual ‘double standard’ and a continuing – deafening – silence about the possibility of female desire and pleasure.⁴⁹

Some sharp-eyed critics of the encyclical recognised this contradiction immediately. Praising the theological distance travelled from Augustine, Jerome and Peter Lombard, the University of London medievalist C. H. Lawrence noted the persistence of a reluctantly ‘concessive attitude’. As he diagnosed:

Even in marriage, sexual acts needed to be “excused” and the only valid excuse was the intention to generate new life. The difficulty that some of us have in understanding the Encyclical arises from this, that when the premises of the teaching have been changed, then the inferences also need to be re-examined.⁵⁰

The contrarian position of the encyclical was not merely its rejection of new contraceptive technologies, and its endorsement of ‘traditional teachings’ in a decade that valorised modernisation and innovation. It also turned on its failure to acknowledge the implications of a transformed theology of marriage and embodied theological anthropology. Karol Wojtyła, writing a decade later as Pope John Paul II, would recognise the need to engage with these ‘inferences’ and, through his corpus enunciating a new ‘theology of the body’, definitively move the church’s bio-politics in a profoundly conservative direction.⁵¹

‘I am now the Pope’s man’: Pragmatism, Pessimism and Permissiveness

⁴⁹ Geiringer, ‘Catholic Understandings of Female Sexuality’, 223-6.

⁵⁰ *The Tablet*, 12 October 1968, 1016.

⁵¹ Stephen Schloesser, ‘Biopolitics and the Construction of Postconciliar Catholicism’ in *A Realist’s Church: Essays in Honor of Joseph Komonchak*, eds. Christopher Denny, Patrick Hayes and Nicholas Rademacher (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015), 147-66.

A striking characteristic of much of the correspondence on *Humanae Vitae* penned by ‘ordinary’ Catholics to the mainstream and religious press – whether in favour or dissenting from the encyclical – is its opening with statements of identity and positionality. This commonly involved declarations of age and marital status, family size (numbers of children tacitly signalling a generous ‘openness to life’), and class, often inferred through occupation or educational background. In this respect, the criteria for critique and claimed expertise echoed the broader societal premium noted by historians of the sixties on appeals to experience, authenticity and ‘ordinary’ commonsense.⁵² Farnham resident Mrs Muriel Greenwood conformed to this pattern when writing to *The Tablet*, by commencing her correspondence with a confession of past doubts and a present-day conversion:

Now, however, having read and pondered *Humanae Vitae*, which as a wife and mother I must say I found so moving I could hardly believe it was written by a mere man – were he *not* the Pope - and having also duly noted the temper of the criticism which has been leveled against him and it, I am now the Pope’s man and in favour of retaining the law as it stands.⁵³

A similar statement of support from Janet de Gaynesford in Buckinghamshire situated her response as a ‘Catholic wife and mother, and one therefore deeply affected by the matters of *Humanae Vitae*’. She continued:

I thank God from the depths of my heart for the Pope’s paternal care and compassion, redolent throughout the Encyclical, and for his ruling, which gives new hope to those who believe that man is a noble and dignified being, made by God for Himself with a longing for that which is good, and not merely an unheeding animal in whom freedom becomes license and love mere appetite.⁵⁴

⁵² Claire Langhamer, “‘Who the Hell are Ordinary People?’ Ordinarity as a Category of Historical Analysis’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 28(2018): 175-95 and Jane Garnett, Matthew Grimley, Alana Harris, Sarah Williams and William Whyte (eds), *Redefining Christian Britain: Post 1945 Perspectives* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 19-34.

⁵³ ‘*The Tablet*, 10 August 1968, 799.

⁵⁴ *The Tablet*, 17 August 1968, 823.

Both these letters were representative of a little acknowledged, socially conservative and in this instance female constituency in sixties Britain that welcomed a definitive restatement of ‘traditional morality’ and abjured the excesses of the permissive society.⁵⁵ Given the still overwhelmingly working class nature of English Catholicism with its heartlands in the north, there are strains within this correspondence of provincial and rural communities that did not ‘swing’ from 1963 and were anxious about the shifting moral landscape. Yet even in London, and amongst a more educated middle class, there were also supporters:

The Encyclical reasserts one of the Church’s most positive and joyful doctrines, on the creation of life rather than the prevention of it. If it is the slightest help to anybody in this difficult time, it is worth saying that we have found that adherence to this teaching in times of strain has brought, as its reward for a minimal degree of self-discipline, an immense increase in mutual respect, love and happiness.

Should it be that we find ourselves in a more isolated minority than I believe now we are, the educated English Catholics supporting the Pope, then our strength lies in the precedent of Thomas More.⁵⁶

This appeal to (historic) martyrdom in justification of an unfashionable position was also a theme in Mancunian Mary Keenan’s identification of the encyclical as a response to critics that ‘the Catholic Church ... [was] going with the contemporary tide towards the worldly paradise of secular values’.⁵⁷ Invoking the conservative social commentator Malcolm Muggeridge (rather than More) as a modern prophetic voice, she opined:

If the Pope’s encyclical is not complete refutation of such an accusation, then what is it? In stressing the *spirituality* of married love and laying down the conditions under which this

⁵⁵ Christie Davies, *The Strange Death of Moral Britain* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2004) and Marcus Collins, *The Permissive Society and its Enemies: Sixties British Culture* (London: River Orams Press, 2007).

⁵⁶ M. T. Bushell, ‘Continuing Doctrine’, *The Times*, 1 August 1968, 9.

⁵⁷ Mary Keenan, ‘Malcolm’s Charge Refuted’, *Catholic Herald*, 16 August 1968, 5.

complies with the moral law, Pope Paul ... makes no compromise with secular values while showing Christ-like compassion for those on whom these conditions may involve heroic discipline.⁵⁸

The nature of these ‘secular values’ in 1968 was enumerated by a number of correspondents – such as serial letter writer (and Latin Mass Society traditionalist) D. G. Galvin of Wonersh (Surrey).⁵⁹ As he declaimed:

... In an age where permissiveness is eating away at the roots of nations’ lives, where sex is shamelessly exploited in the mass media of the day and the pill is discussed and peddled as if it were some form of detergent ... for the Church to relax her teaching on birth control would be to associate herself (however indirectly) with these trends.⁶⁰

Elderly clergy like Fr Edward Holloway of Portslade denounced the breakdown in marriage, the rise of infidelity and ‘the increasing neurosis of the child in Western humanist society’ to ‘the sexualisation of Western society ... and the vast army of sex and drug addicted youth, themselves in contemptuous revolt against the aimless, hedonistic society which has begotten them and degraded them’.⁶¹ Here permissiveness, secularization and moral panics over youthful degeneration were diagnoses of the dilemma that the encyclical sought to counteract. Mrs Frances Keegan from Stockport similarly took a disparaging view of the current generation, welcoming the restatement of old verities and pre-war austerity which ‘we have been practicing ... for past generations, [though] self-control and self-discipline are words,

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Alana Harris, ‘A Fresh Stripping of the Altars? Liturgical Language and the Legacy of the Reformation in England, 1964-1984’ in *Catholics in the Vatican II era: Local Histories of a Global Event*, eds. Kathleen Cummings, Timothy Matovina and Robert Orsi (Cambridge: CUP, 2017), 245-274 at 258.

⁶⁰ ‘Continuing Doctrine’, *The Times*, 1 August 1968, 9.

⁶¹ ‘Solving a Dilemma’, *The Times*, 2 August 1968, 9.

I am afraid, which don't seem to be included in the modern vocabulary.'⁶² She was not alone in this assessment, as some contemporaneous polls within the broadly working-class *Universe* newspaper suggested over 60% of correspondents backed the encyclical.⁶³ Larger scale polls presented a more closely balanced division of opinion,⁶⁴ however, and correspondents hailing or lamenting the ruling in writing to the Archbishop of Westminster were themselves quite evenly split.⁶⁵

While some of these commentaries blamed societal forces for the 'crisis in the church' (the leader under which *The Tablet* ran all such correspondence over three months), other analysts placed the blame for this upheaval on their coreligionists and the refashioned attitude to sexuality sounded by *Humanae Vitae*. As Lance Wright from Pangbourne evocatively reflected, in a lengthy piece:

What strikes me first is the change in attitude toward the sexual act which has taken place among Christians and others during the fifty years or so that contraception has been in the air.

Whereas before, the pleasure associated with the sexual act was regarded as a rare bonus, the by-product of a necessary biological function, it has now become akin to the interest on a preference share: something which causes almost insupportable indignation if this is not received at regular intervals.⁶⁶

Acknowledging the importance of physical affection but observing that a 'hug and a kiss are immeasurably more effective' to 'cement a marriage than frequent intercourse', he sardonically predicted:

⁶² "'Universe" Readers Back Ruling', *The Universe*, 9 August 1968, 3.

⁶³ *The Universe*, 16 August 1968, based on received correspondence of around 60 letters per week. On the increasing appeal to opinion polls to adjudicate political issues, see Laura Beers, 'Whose Opinion? Changing Attitudes Towards Opinion Polling in British Politics, 1937-1964', *Twentieth Century British History* 17(2)(2006): 177-205.

⁶⁴ 'The Polls', *Catholic Herald*, 30 August 1968, 2 reporting wider surveys.

⁶⁵ Alana Harris, 'A Galileo Crisis not a Luther Crisis? English Catholics' Attitudes to Contraception' in Harris, *Schism of '68*, 84.

⁶⁶ *The Tablet*, 14 September 1968, 921.

We must remember that we are only seeing the earliest beginnings of the social evolution triggered off by contraception. Scarifying as these are, we have a long way to go. Sexual behavior[u]r will become much more casual than it now is. ('Gladys, hold my bag while I have a go with that handsome stranger ...')

At some stage in this development Christian opinion will finally rally against it and against contraception; but by then it might be too late.⁶⁷

In Mr Wright's acerbic, indeed misogynistic 'warning', the unfettered desire of 'Gladys' and her supposed middle-aged companion is a bellwether of a troubled, indulgent and disordered society. Others, such as foundry labourer E. J. Douthwaite of Southminster who expressly ventriloquized the 'common man', wrote of the sexualized banter of his working class workplace as far exceeding 'an "Alf Garnett" sense of humour' and sought to puncture elite and idealistic aspirations to greater respect of women and a sacralized spirituality through the use of contraception.⁶⁸

Other commentators used humour to object on differing grounds. Bernard Connelly of Middlesbrough, whose letter began that he was 'tired of being called an "establishment man" or a "religious conservative" because I dare to stand by the Pope's properly constituted decision', denounced the 'bar stool reformers'.⁶⁹ He rhetorically asked how many of these 'Pontificating Catholics' were concerned enough about the large families of the working poor to help out with the real oppression and domestic drudgery faced in places like east London. Rather than obsessing about the sex lives of working-class others, their energies should be

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ *The Tablet*, 7 September 1968, 897.

⁶⁹ 'Social Aid for Poor Families', *Catholic Herald*, 9 August 1968, 5.

channeled into the enormous needs of the British poor for better social conditions.⁷⁰

In contrast, Mrs M. Duffy turned to parody:

At the risk of turning your paper into *The Lancet*, may one who has practiced the “rhythm” method for some years put forward the most obvious of the many reasons, both physical and psychological, why it is so unsatisfactory?

The number of my “safe” days, which are capable of being determined without hindsight, averages one in five (i.e. one week in five). A sex-mad lot we Catholics, to find this ration rather less than is necessary for anything approaching a normal marriage!⁷¹

With its discussion of clinicians, calculations and intimacy ‘rations’, there was a notable absence of romance and sexual spontaneity in this Wimbledon housewife’s ironic, backhanded endorsement of ‘rhythm’.

‘Man and wife in 1968 are not like that’: Marital Experience and Male Sexuality under Scrutiny

British newspapers and magazines throughout the late summer of 1968 were full of correspondence detailing the disastrous experiences of Catholic women and men with the ‘rhythm method’.⁷² These testimonial outpourings were often marked by two interrelated factors – an assertion that in this most intimate of areas the voices of the laity should be prioritized and, secondly, that decisions in good conscience should be determined not by legalistic dictum but a specific and subjective evaluation of each marriage’s nature and needs. ‘Catholic mother’ from Lancashire was representative of this newly created confessional genre in her detailed account of the failure of ‘periodic abstinence’ through seven pregnancies in eight years (with one of the children severely handicapped):

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ ‘Sex Mad Lot’, *Catholic Herald*, 16 August 1968, 5.

⁷² This trend began much earlier in the United States, gathering force from 1962. See Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 199-203, 210-232.

... my husband said this really must be the end of our family; it was no more use putting more faith in the safe period. He said he was going to use contraceptives in future; that it was his decision, his sin, and I could go to Communion in good conscience ... I felt better than I had for years – the sword which had been hanging over my head had gone. I began to live instead of just exist. ... In my humble opinion it is degrading and even if it works it is an absolute farce. It really is too much to expect a young couple deeply in love and attracted to each other to sleep together for weeks at a time and keep their feelings under control.

And how could anyone expect a man who works away from home for lengths of time, returning home with burning love for his wife, to contain his feelings for another ten days?⁷³

Here in the late 1960s, we also have a wife ‘quite satisfied with the arrangements [her husband] has made’, as Kate Fisher observed of male working-class contraceptive decisions in the interwar period.⁷⁴ Male contraceptive responsibility, at least as confessed in the press, survived the marked changes in contraceptive technologies. Tellingly within this female perspective on contraception and its reference to the ardent passion of a newly married couple, there was also a tacit acknowledgement of female (as well as male) desire and enjoyment of marital sex.

Some letters, especially those written directly to the Archbishop of Westminster and likely from an educated, middle class audience, evinced a very close interrogation of the terms of the encyclical and a wrestling with its specifications about ‘openness to human life’, uniting love and the sacred character of Christian marriage. A striking example was a heartfelt and frank letter to Cardinal Heenan sent from a non-Catholic man who confided:

⁷³ ‘Catholic Mother’, *Catholic Herald*, 16 August 1968, 5.

⁷⁴ Kate Fisher, “‘She was Quite Satisfied with the Arrangements I Made’: Gender and Birth Control in Britain, 1920-1950”, *Past & Present* 169(1)(2000): 161-193 and Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 113-162.

I am not a member of your Church but my wife is, and we have tried dutifully to abide by what we understood to be the Church's attitude to birth control. We have five children ...

Because my wife's periods are extremely irregular and her basal temperature is given to extreme fluctuations, the only method acceptable to the Church is quite impossible for us. Must we then abstain completely from intercourse? Would this not amount to sin on the part of either my wife or myself if we are not both in agreement about it?

We have concluded that, for us, artificial methods of spacing and limiting our family will enable us to live a full and happy married life wherein we can give the children the love and attention they need; all our experiences are contrary to the forebodings of the Encyclical and it is our love and respect for each other, not the opposite, that has brought us to this conclusion.

... But this subject is one where we cannot disagree if we are to be true to our marriage vows; in no other context have I ever seen my wife hurt so cruelly by the Church she loves so dearly. ...

- I beg you to proclaim boldly that it is not a mortal sin for those to use artificial methods of contraception who at present feel they must, that the Church still loves them, and that they can and must still love the Church.⁷⁵

As an appeal from one outside the Catholic church, narrating the strains in his married life in adhering to – and now to dissenting from – the church's teaching, this letter encapsulated the dilemmas of many Catholic couples who, in the wake of July 1968, wanted to find a way to stay within the church while practicing family planning. Just such dilemmas prompted 76 prominent lay Catholics (mostly men) to sign a petition in *The Times* calling for a reappraisal of the encyclical and an acknowledgement that 'the choice of birth control should be made by the husband and wife in the conscientious exercise of their responsibility to uphold and foster a creative love.'⁷⁶ One of those signatories, an upstanding Catenian (i.e. an International Catholic

⁷⁵ Letter from Brian Foster, Cholsey (Berkshire) to Cardinal Heenan, 7 October 1968, AAW HE1/C20(F).

⁷⁶ '76 Leading Laymen Join in Criticism of the Encyclical', *The Times*, 4 October 1968, 2 and 'Graham Green in attack over Pill', *Daily Mail*, 4 October 1968, 5.

laymen's association)⁷⁷ and member of the post-conciliar Liturgical Commission, was Bruce Cooper. A longstanding campaigner for birth control reform since the opening of the Second Vatican Council,⁷⁸ in a series of correspondence in 1968 this Middlesbrough husband and father systematically demolished the encyclical's endorsement of a reductive and rigid definition of love:

...[the previous correspondent] seems to assume that the only self-control possible is that so conveniently provided by the discipline of the monthly calendar.

There are rather more human, less mechanistic ways of exercising self-control which have absolutely nothing to do with whether you use contraceptives or not. (I don't as it happens).

There are matters such as concern and love for one's partner who is tired, depressed, out-of-sorts; or the facts that the demands of the children leave one so often with neither the opportunity nor inclination "to perform the marriage act" – to quote Mr Flaxman's charming, legalistic and moralizing phrase.

Personally, I have never regarded it as a performance, but a mutual coming together in an act of love and self-giving. Evidently we need instead a coldly calculated temperature-taking, calendar studying, chart-reading, urine-sampling paraphernalia to provide us with our opportunities for making love.

I'm afraid that, as one of the 76 signatories, I do see very little difference between this planned gadgetry and pill-swallowing. I look more at intention.⁷⁹

Conversations that had begun in Britain on the publication of the 'Majority Report' were continued, and in the process there emerged in the public discussions a mostly male, lay-led constituency seeking to give texture and application to an updated

⁷⁷ Alana Harris, "The People of God dressed for dinner and dancing"? English Catholic Masculinity, Religious Sociability and the Catenian Society' in Delap and Morgan, *Men, Masculinity and Religious Change*, 54-89.

⁷⁸ See his article under the pseudonym 'A Catholic Parent', 'Catholics and Birth Control', *The Spectator*, 30 August 1963 and under his own name 'Catholics and Birth Control', *The Spectator*, 8 May 1964, 626.

⁷⁹ Bruce Cooper, 'Human Ways of Exercising Control', *Catholic Herald*, 25 October 1968, 5.

theology of marriage. One such was G. Meteau from Sutton in suburban London who reflected:

Why talk about birth control, when the real issue is the physical expression of love in marriage?

To be precise, what is in question is the distinction between what Pope Pius XI has condemned as “irresponsible carnal desire” and what is very different – genuine marital love.

There is considerable justification for claiming that this distinction has not been made clear in the official pronouncements of the Church, with the result that many married Catholics are made to feel guilty in expressing their genuine marital love for each other more frequently than they can reasonably permit child-bearing to occur.

... Surely Christ’s message is that we should show our love for God by a genuine expression of love for each other.⁸⁰

As Mark Chapman and Sam Brewitt-Taylor have explored in the context of the Church of England, here is a grassroots, Catholic articulation of the ‘new morality’ and the cardinal virtue of love.⁸¹ A married couples’ experience of love in all its forms – romantic, mutually supportive and sexually passionate – was recognized as a place of encounter and dialogue with the divine, and therefore axiomatic in moral decision-making. The conventional context of heterosexual marriage – as a sacramental institution and sociological reality – remained the setting for this refashioned appreciation of passion (*eros* with *agape*). This was not an endorsement of ‘free love’, but a refinement or reappraisal of a traditional and thoroughly conventional institution.⁸²

‘1968 youth need 1968 priests’: Clerical Masculinity and Celibacy Re-examined

⁸⁰ G. Meteau, ‘The Real Issue is About Love in Marriage’, *Catholic Herald*, 31 May 1968, 5.

⁸¹ Mark Chapman, ‘Theology in the Public Arena: the Case of Southbank Religion’ in Garnett et al, *Redefining Christian Britain*, 92-105 and Sam Brewitt-Taylor, *Christian Radicalism in the Church of England and the Invention of the British Sixties, 1957-1970* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), 184-98.

⁸² ‘Universe Readers still for the Pope’, *The Universe*, 16 August 1968, 3.

Attempts to refashion masculinity and the place of sexuality within existing gender norms lay at the heart of some of the most impassioned interventions in these highly public debates. Unsurprisingly married laypeople took the lead here, but alongside these personalized interventions, constructions of the (male) priesthood were also mobilized. In these debates, celibacy could function as a mode of differentiation of a sexually-active couple from an emasculated and ignorant ‘other’. Alternatively, in other contexts the voices of dissenting priests could be amplified so as to speak for ‘everyman’, drawing upon pastoral acquaintance with hundreds of marriages and therefore sociological and experiential expertise. Representative of this first denunciatory mode was Bruce Cooper’s searing condemnation of clerical chauvinism two weeks after the encyclical’s publication. Writing in *The Tablet* about the Liturgical Commission’s task to rewrite the marriage vows and jettison the ‘love, honour and obey’ formulations – more than four decades after the Church of England had done so⁸³ – he professed despair:

What we have been trying to expunge from the old rites has been the servitude of women in a masculine dominated society. She it is who has to obey; it is she who must shun the embraces of others. By implication the man has greater freedom to do as he pleases. We have been trying to equalize the relationship, reflecting on the dignity of women.

If one studies the *language* of the Encyclical and the pastorals, one does seriously begin to wonder whether the celibate clergy are ever going to understand the *nature* of the relationship between the sexes: ‘a mere instrument of pleasure’ (Pope Paul); ‘a husband must not make *unreasonable demands* on his wife (Archbishop Dwyer); ‘a mere *chattel* of her Lord (Archbishop Murphy). The language is medieval or clinical, and so is the thinking. Man is a predator, a randy, sexual animal. Sex is put on the same level as booze and fags. That is the

⁸³ Timothy Willem Jones, ‘Love, Honour and Obey? Romance, Subordination and Marital Subjectivity in Interwar Britain’, in Harris and Jones, *Love and Romance*, 124-43.

message that comes across. All one can say in all humility, your lordships, is that sexual love between a man and wife in 1968 is just not like that ...⁸⁴ [original emphasis]

Unlikely as he would be to call himself a feminist, or even look to channel these sentiments through the small and emerging anti-sexist men's movement,⁸⁵ Cooper and others like him were seeking new frameworks for the resourcing of masculinity beyond the sexual double standard and male superiority. For a minority of correspondents, this might also encompass a more engaged fatherhood, such as this poignant letter from a Liverpudlian so riled by the ruling that he asked rhetorically:

Has he [a clerical correspondent] ever been called to a hospital in the middle of the night because his wife, in giving birth, was in grave danger of death? Has he ever had to assure his five children – not once, but four times – that 'The doctor says that your Mum will be alright, thank God, but your baby brother (or sister) was dead when he was born and has gone to God'?

The answer is of course 'no', because he is single. Yet he has the audacity to describe those Catholics who cannot agree with the Pope as – 'arrogant'?⁸⁶

Medical practitioners such as Dr R J. Halpin also questioned the standing of celibate priests without first-hand experience of marital problems to pontificate on such matters. Speaking on behalf of many in the profession, this Staffordshire physician concluded:

In condemning a woman to a possible premature death or suggesting a course of action which may lead to a complete break-up for the family as a unit, it is the doctor invariably who has to press the button and accept the consequences. That is why *Humanae Vitae* has not impressed many Catholic doctors.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ *The Tablet*, 17 August 1968, 822.

⁸⁵ Lucy Delap, 'Feminism, Masculinities and Emotional Politics in the late Twentieth Century', *Cultural and Social History* 15(4)(2018): 571-593 and 'Uneasy Solidarity: The British Men's Movement and Feminism' in *Women's Liberation Movement: Impacts and Outcomes*, ed. Kristina Schulz (Oxford: Berghahn, 2017), 214-36.

⁸⁶ *The Catholic Pictorial*, 10 November 1968, 8.

⁸⁷ 'Doctor's Answer', *Catholic Herald*, 11 October 1968.

For a married, societally conservative and thoroughly ‘respectable’ generation, unlike the younger, single, sexually-experimental and more feminist constituency given centre stage in much of the historiography of the ‘pill’,⁸⁸ the advent of hormonal contraceptives here seemingly failed to dislodge public expressions of male priority in contraceptive decisions and reproductive matters. Whether determined by husbands or male gynecologists, *public* expressions of female sexual autonomy and contraceptive agency in so much of this correspondence remained strikingly muted. Acknowledgement of female eroticism and sexual autonomy were a bridge too far in these tentative steps towards women’s liberation, and perhaps there was also sanguine appreciation – as the encyclical identified – that appeals to ‘female pleasure’ could give license to the unfettered demands of the male libido.

Completing this triad of authoritative male voices were a number of paternalistic yet progressive priests who articulated the difficulties of the married laity while witnessing to alternative tropes of masculinity through their embrace of celibacy.⁸⁹ Drawing on their experience ministering to married couples in the confessional and everyday parish life, many young, reformist clergy were impelled to voice their public dissent from the ruling – incurring, in some instances, episcopal sanction for extending the right of conscientious objection to priestly adjudications.⁹⁰ One such

⁸⁸ Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex and Contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford: OUP, 2004) and ‘The English Sexual Revolution: Technology and Social Change’ *History Workshop Journal* 59(1)(2005): 109-28.

⁸⁹ Jones, *Sexual Politics*, 129. On clerical celibacy, emasculation and queer sexuality see Timothy Willem Jones, ‘The Stained Glass Closet: Celibacy and Homosexuality in the Church of England’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20(1)(2011): 132-52 and Mark Chapman and Dominic Janes (eds), *New Approaches in History and Theology to Same-Sex Love and Desire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁹⁰ E.g. Kenneth Allan (Coulsden) – ‘Bishops take Varied Line on Warning Priests’, *Catholic Herald*, 1 November 1968, 1 and Nottingham Catholic Renewal Group, *Four Honest Men: Suspended Priests in the Diocese of Nottingham* (Nottingham: The Partisan Press, 1969). Allan married in 1971.

clergyman whose plight attracted front page headlines and correspondence to his bishop⁹¹ was Father Paul Weir – a charismatic 31-year-old curate from Cheam whose suspension from ministry prompted a youth group from his suburban parish to march to Southwark Cathedral for a ‘pray in’ under the banner ‘1968 youth need 1968 priests’.⁹² (Figure 1) Dubbed ‘the rebel priest’ in extensive coverage in *The Times* and *The Daily Mail*,⁹³ Father Weir’s high profile opposition to the encyclical in the pulpit and the press captivated widespread attention with his own pronouncement:

I am praying for guidance. But my mind is made up on whether contraception is an intrinsic evil. [The rhythm method] involves long periods of abstinence from making love which places an unbearable strain on the marriage.⁹⁴

Such interventions were symptomatic of a cause that *could* conjoin priest and laity, as the 55 clerical signatories to a petition published in *The Times* on 2nd October attested.⁹⁵ Prominent clergy who signed included Peter de Rosa (Vice-Principal of the newly-opened and highly progressive theological college *Corpus Christi*),⁹⁶ Sutton Coldfields educationalist Canon F. H. Drinkwater,⁹⁷ priests involved in chaplaincy work like Fabian Cowper OSB from the University of London, and a number of male religious such as Guy Braithwaite OP who were part of an organization calling for an ‘Open Church’.⁹⁸ The Dominican Order was at the heart of these post-conciliar

⁹¹ Correspondence from Ann Thorp to Cardinal John Heenan, 13 August 1968 and from L. R. and M. Roberts to Cardinal Heenan, 13 August 1968, AAW WEI1/C/20(E).

⁹² ‘Pray-ins and Protests’, *Catholic Herald*, 23 August 1968, 2.

⁹³ ‘Archbishop Bars Rebel Priest’, *The Times*, 13 August 1968, 1 and ‘Fr Weir Leaves in Search of a New Home’, *The Times*, 15 August 1968, 2.

⁹⁴ ‘Vatican reply to “foolhardy critics”’, *The Times*, 14 August 1968, 1.

⁹⁵ ‘55 Priests Defy the Pope’, *The Times*, 2 October 1968, 1 and 11.

⁹⁶ See his letter, *The Tablet*, 5 October 1968, 991. For discussion of *Corpus Christi*, see V. Alan McClelland, ‘John Carmel Heenan, The Second Vatican Council and the Rise and Fall of an English *Lumen Vitae*’ in *Essays in Tribute to J. Valentine Rice, 1935-2006*, ed. A. Seery (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2010), 69-97.

⁹⁷ See *The Tablet*, 10 August 1968, 779 and *The Tablet*, 12 October 1968, 1017

⁹⁸ ‘Church Militant’, *Catholic Herald*, 9 August 1968, 2 and ‘Plea for an “Open Church”’, *Catholic Herald*, 13 September 1968, 5.

debates⁹⁹ and Herbert McCabe and Gils Hibbert¹⁰⁰ were representative in their contestations of the encyclical's contortions of 'natural law'. Such uncharacteristically frank discussions of sexuality and forthright critique of church teaching led *The Times* to dub such ministerial opponents as 'angry young men',¹⁰¹ in a telling reference to the playwright John Osborne's railings against the establishment and tradition.¹⁰² Yet this analogy did not entirely hold, given the scope of opposition from priests across diverse generations and often from middle-class backgrounds. Moreover, there was a marked tendency of those expressing disquiet to seek an interview with their superior and requests for laicization,¹⁰³ rather than public adjudication and martyrdom through an epistle to a newspaper editor. The quiet mass exodus of clergy struggling with issues of conscience, freedom of expression and celibacy – thought to number around 100 men per year in England from 1968 onwards – is another important and little explored dimension of this story.¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, there *was* something in this media-framed interrogation of heterodox clerical masculinities (with a whiff of patricide) that shared characteristics with the broader *zeitgeist*, as Father Michael Richards unwittingly acknowledged. In an extended article for the popular religious broadsheet *The Universe*, the editor of the monthly *Clergy Review* declaimed:

The agony comes from hearing harsh and bitter words spoken by a few who are also ordained priests, words which every newspaper gives to the world, words which are aimed against the Church which they once served.

⁹⁹ Jay P. Corrin, *Catholic Progressives in England After Vatican II* (Southbend: University of Notre Dame, 2013).

¹⁰⁰ 'Natural Law', *The Times*, 9 August 1968, 7.

¹⁰¹ 'Why more priests will resign', *The Times*, 17 August 1968, 6.

¹⁰² Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (Virago, London, 1990), 13-16.

¹⁰³ E.g. W. Yeomaus SJ (Southwell House, London) to Cardinal Heenan, 25 October 1968, AAW HE1/C20(H).

¹⁰⁴ Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception*, 268-76 and McLeod, *Religious Crisis*, 193.

Real men do not respect those who turn on their families or on other human societies of which they were once loyal members to expose them to scorn or ridicule.

There is no reason why real men should respect the views of those who do the same to the Church ... the simple confrontation of brother with brother within the peace of the Church. ... Those who make protests are, it is supposed, the real he-men. It is the reverse that is true. ... There are men today who are glad to see a priest turn his mind away for that moment, making truth into something false.

Some of those men think they are serving God by helping a priest falter in his resolution.¹⁰⁵

‘Real masculinity’ in this rendering was obedient, loyal and ‘above’ sordid discussions of sexuality. The real ‘he-men’ were those priests who suppressed disquiet or those laymen who refrained from challenging their ministers. Tacitly in Fr Richards’ sights were the laymen and women within the so-called *Ad Hoc Committee*, who urged dissenting priests to write to their London N6 postbox rather than court suspension,¹⁰⁶ (Figure 2) and who established a ‘Freedom of Conscience Appeal Fund’ to support clergy transitioning from active ministry.¹⁰⁷ In urging a ‘listen-in’ rather than ‘teach in’ and prescribing humility and patience rather than bravado and clamour, Father Richards concluded ‘If the newspaper disturbs you, read St Paul to the Galatians, chapter 5’. Those following up on his suggestion would find there a stern injunction to stand firm, but also an exhortation to be ‘circumcised in Christ’. The Pauline teaching concluded that those who were troubling the faithful should ‘castrate themselves’ and that true freedom lies in the Spirit rather than the works of the flesh (immorality, impurity, licentiousness). In this catechist’s metaphorically laden message to his seemingly libidinous clerical brothers, diverse constructions of

¹⁰⁵ ‘A Happy Priest Proclaims His Credo’, *The Universe*, 30 August 1968, 6.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Priests who Can’t Agree with the Encyclical’, *Catholic Herald*, 23 August 1968, 2 (describing over 100 letters received). There were, however, Ad Hoc Committees around the country – see ‘Priests attack Ad Hoc Teach-In’, *Catholic Herald*, 14 March 1969 (in Leicester).

¹⁰⁷ The Conservative MP (and controversial *Catholic Herald* weekly columnist) Norman St-John Stevas was one of the driving figures behind this, alongside Baroness Asquith – ‘Help Grows for Former Priests’, *Catholic Herald*, 25 October 1968, 2.

masculinity and sexuality were at play. Paragraph 29 of *Humanae Vitae* had urged ‘husbands and wives, when deeply distressed by reason of the difficulties of their life, [to] find stamped in the heart and voice of their priest the likeness of the voice and the love of our Redeemer.’ As these clerical wrangles demonstrated, there were differing assessments *amongst* British Catholics priests too as to how far one could go. Under what circumstances was marital sexuality redeemed by the incarnation, so as to be a place of encounter with the love of Christ as divine spouse?

Conclusion: A Rebellion of the Barons

In an unusual letter within the *Catholic Herald* which opened ‘as a bachelor I shall have no immediate difficulty in observing *Humanae Vitae*’, Whitehall civil servant Philip Daniel nevertheless claimed standing to speak into these debates:

as a person who has not hesitated to identify himself in our plural society as a Catholic, I cannot slip away in dark glasses to avoid [the questions of] my senior colleagues in Government service who are anxious to understand the rational grounds for the Papal direction.¹⁰⁸

In outlining the difficulties of such explanations to ‘outsiders’, he concluded rhetorically:

What indeed are we to think as common Englishmen of an archiepiscopal statement which cites Magna Carta and states “in these matters ... *all* compassion, *all* erudition, *all* theological acumen is of little account.”¹⁰⁹ [original emphasis]

Such perspectives were echoed in the slightly more ‘high-brow’ but, under the new editorship of Tom Burns, also theological progressive weekly *The Tablet*. In an editorial headed ‘Facing the Facts’, there was a rare (and unrepeated) framing of the contraceptive debate squarely around women’s rights:

¹⁰⁸ ‘No silencing’, *Catholic Herald*, 9 August 1968, 5.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

...modern married woman must have a voice: she has hardly any in the Church today. She is depicted in text-books of moral theology, and throughout pastoral teaching, in a way which conforms very little to her nature and her rights. The very idea that she shares her husband's sex life up to its supreme embodiment in procreation is chimerical.

The truth is that marriage is a matter of joined lives and joint choices ... It is unrealistic to think that the stresses and temptations of a married couple begin and end with their sex life.¹¹⁰

In a pithy and forthright encapsulation of these more abstract sentiments, Londoner C. M. Potts wrote to the *Catholic Herald* to ask:

Why is woman an instrument of a man's pleasure when together they plan their children, but not when he inflicts unwanted children on her?

How is it more dignified to be prematurely aged by excessive child-bearing and neurotic love-making than to arrange one's own children?¹¹¹

It was these conundrums and contradictions embedded within *Humanae Vitae* itself, and interrogated by the Catholic laity, that this article has explored. For those British Catholics who welcomed Paul VI's pronouncements, they found here an antidote to societal drifts towards seeming religious and moral decline and a reiterated clarity in church teaching. Here was a Catholic constituency that might, in the decade following, seek like-minded travellers in pan-Christian settings around conservative agendas like the Nationwide Festival of Light.¹¹² For an equally vociferous and usually male group who commanded, perhaps, more press attention, the encyclical itself and their episcopal pastors failed to appreciate the changing understandings of married sexuality, love in all its romantic and prosaic manifestations, and women's (and men's) refashioned place in British society. At the root of these acrimonious debates – including the role and representation of Catholic clergy as advocates or opponents of the encyclical – were unstable renderings of modern masculinities and

¹¹⁰ 'Facing the Facts', *The Tablet*, 10 August 1968, 786.

¹¹¹ 'Questions that need answering', *Catholic Herald*, 30 August 1968, 4.

¹¹² Amy C. Whipple, 'Speaking for Whom? The 1971 Festival of Light and the Search for the "Silent Majority"', *Contemporary British History* 24(3)(2010): 319-39.

the place of sexuality within a Catholic husband's self-definition and expression of spousal affection. Whether conjured as a domestically engaged and sexually considerate husband or as undisciplined and insatiable beast, the *Humanae Vitae* debate ventilated diverse renderings of male sexuality and spousal responsibilities. Within the encyclical, but especially within the vast correspondence it elicited, there remained a priority on sex as fundamentally procreative. Nevertheless, there were also tentative expressions in the debate it elicited about the joy of sex and the importance of physical intimacy (and even pleasure) to sustaining marital love.

In view of the prominence given to newspaper commentaries and letters to the editor within this discussion, it is clear that the media was a key instigator and chief interlocutor within these debates.¹¹³ As the editor of the *Catholic Herald* jauntily admitted in August: 'when I read the Encyclical I realized, as every editor of a Catholic journal must have done, that here was a Roman time-bomb: a theological and pastoral blockbuster'.¹¹⁴ Within a long piece defending the paper's decision to 'ventilate publicly the promptings of conscience over birth control and a non-infallible Encyclical' which led to the *Catholic Herald* being banned in some parishes, Albrow offered an unlikely endorsement to Archbishop Murphy's Magna Carta analogy:

... it is significant that it is British Catholics, reared in the most advanced of political democracies and nourished on the milk of free speech, who have been most vociferous in the debate in *Humanae Vitae*. It is a point worth remembering and reflecting on in Rome.

This is also a point worth remembering and reflecting upon by historians of the transformed gendered, emotional and moral landscape of 1960s Britain. While for

¹¹³ On the Church of England and the media, see Sam Brewitt-Taylor, 'The Invention of a "Secular Society"? Christianity and the Sudden Appearance of Secularization Discourses in the British National Media, 1961-4', *Twentieth Century British History* 24(3)(2013): 327-50.

¹¹⁴ Desmond Albrow, 'Publish and be Banned', *Catholic Herald*, 30 August 1968, 4.

some 1963 has been identified as an ‘annus mirabilis’ and a watershed in the sexual landscape of the sixties, for British Catholics writing from places as diverse as the Home Counties, rural northern England and suburban London, 1968 marked the beginning of a new epoch. For good or ill, as a touchstone of orthodoxy or a lightning rod of opposition, *Humanae Vitae* would become a foundational charter for a reappraisal of (married) love and a refashioned sexual politics in the late sixties and well beyond.

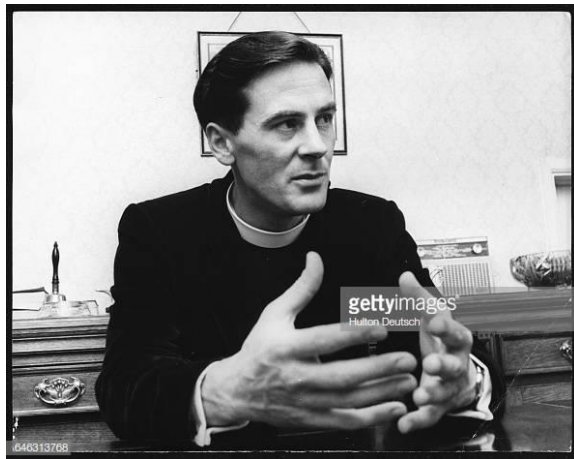


Figure 1: Father Paul Weir, a British Catholic priest suspended from his duties for his opposition to the Pope's ruling on birth control – here in St Cecilia's Presbytery, Cheam. [Permission from Hulton-Deutsch collection, Getty Images]



Figure 2: A satirical reflection on lay agency and increasing militancy in response to *Humanae Vitae* through the eyes of *Catholic Herald* cartoonist, John Ryan. *The Catholic Herald*, 1 November 1968, 1. [Copyright permission granted by the estate of John Ryan]